

Victorian School Days

Many Victorian children from poor families did not get to go to school and never learnt how to read or write. As soon as the children were old enough, they had to go to work and earn money for their families.



Today, every child in Britain has the right to a free education. This means that they did not have to pay fees to go to school. This was introduced during Queen Victoria's reign in 1891. Before then children had to pay to go to school.

Poor children often went to free charity schools or Sunday Schools. The Old Sunday School in Macclesfield, which is part of Macclesfield Museums, was one of these schools.

At school children spent most of their time on the 3 R's – 'reading, riting and 'rithmetic'. We would call this reading, writing and maths. Once a week they would do geography, history and singing. The girls would learn how to sew.

School was extremely strict. If you did not behave you were in "big trouble"; If you got an answer wrong you were often made to sit in the corner wearing a Dunce's cap. If you did not sit up straight you might have to sit with a wooden stick up your back. If you misbehaved, you could be beaten with a cane or hit across the knuckles with a ruler. Thankfully, this is not allowed any longer.



The Victorian School Room at The Old Sunday School, Macclesfield

Activities - Learning to write

Writing in sand

Materials – sand or flour, shallow tray, stick



The youngest children at school would practise writing letters and numbers in sand-trays. If you have some sand fill a shallow container with it. Try and write your name in the sand. First use your finger. Then use a stick, holding it like a pencil.

Next play a game with someone else. One of you picks an animal and starts drawing it in the sand. The other person has to try and guess what it is without talking to you. Take it in turns to draw an animal. Good ones to try are snake, elephant, crocodile, fish, lion, giraffe.

If you don't have any sand, then you can do this activity with flour.

Stone faces

Materials – pebbles, chalk or paint



Paper was expensive in Victorian times so children often wrote on slates. These were flat pieces of stone. They scratched their letters onto it using a sharpened stone (this was another piece of slate that they used like a pencil). The slates could easily be rubbed clean with a piece of cloth and used again.

Start this activity by collecting a small pile of stones. Can

you use one of the stones to scratch a picture onto another one? Use a damp cloth to clean it.

Draw features of a face on separate stones using another stone or some chalk. Make some stones with eyes, noses, and mouths. You can then use your stones to make some funny stone faces.

If you are feeling creative you can add in eyebrows, beards or funny hair.



Ink pens and ink

Materials – straw, scissors, washable paint or food colouring, water, small bottle or glass, paper, feather (optional)



When children became older and had perfected their 'copperplate' handwriting they could use dipping ink pens and ink. Each child had an inkwell (a small tub of ink) and a pen.

The pens didn't store the ink. They had to dip the pen in the inkwell frequently and try not to get blobs of ink on their work. It was not easy!



Make your own ink pen and ink:

Take a straw. If it has a bendy bit cut that part off. Cut the end of your straw at an angle to make a point or a nib. Cut a very short slit up from the point – only about 3 mm long. This will hold the ink.

If you have a feather you can stick it in the other end of your straw to make it look like a quill.

To make your ink you can use either washable paint or food colouring. If you are using paint add water to a small amount of paint and mix it. It should be very runny. For food colouring fill a small pot with water and add a few drops of food colouring. The more food colouring you add the darker your ink will be.

Using your straw pen:

Dip the pointy end into the ink. Tap it on the side of your ink container to get rid of any drops. Then use your pen to draw on some paper. If you wipe your pen on some tissue you could use different colours to create a picture.



School days



Some things about going to school change and some stay the same. Can you write 3 questions to ask your family and friends about their school days?

Use your questions to interview people you know about school. Does their time at school sound like yours? What was different.

Question Suggestions – you could ask them about uniform, games they played in the playground, what they had for their lunch at school, or what their teachers were like. Were there computers in their classroom?



Counting Activities

Build an abacus:

Materials – 2 different coloured straws, string or wool, scissors, a dice.



Victorian children did not use calculators in maths lessons. They used something called an abacus to practice their counting, like rows of bead strings.

You can make your own bead strings at home using straws. You need 2 different coloured straws. Cut your straws into beads. Each bead should be about the same size. You need 10 beads of each colour.

Put them onto a string or some wool. Put all of one colour on first and then the others. Tie knots at each end so they don't fall off. Make sure that the string is long enough that the beads can move along and be separated from each other.

- Can you use your beads to work out all the different ways to make 10? If you start with 1 bead of one colour, how many of the other colour do you need to make 10? Then try with 2 of the first colour.
- Roll a dice two times. Add the numbers together. Can you find that number of beads on your bead line?
- Victorian children played a lot of marble games. Can you use your bead line to find the answer to these problems?

Fred had 8 marbles. He wins 6 more. How many does he have now?

Arthur has 15 marbles and loses 6. How many does he have left?

Doreen has 6 marbles. She wins 6 more. How many does she have now?



Victorian money



A lot of the maths that Victorian children learnt was about money. We now have 100 pennies to make a pound. It was more complicated then. There were pounds (£), shillings (s), pence (d) and farthings (1/4).

First the children had to learn the rules for how many pennies were in a shilling, how many shillings in a pound and so on. They did this by saying them out loud over and over again. Here are the rules - read them aloud 10 times and see if you can remember them without looking:

There are 4 farthings in a penny

There are 12 pennies in a shilling

There are 20 shillings in a pound

There are 21 shillings in a guinea

Can you work out how many farthings there would be in 2 pennies?

If I had one penny and 2 farthings, how many pennies would I have?

How many shillings are there in 2 pounds?

If I have one penny and I spend 2 farthings, how many pennies have I got left?